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Walkout at Madison West leads to meeting, promises of change

By Andrew Merica
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MADISON (WKOW) — Students of Madison West High School staged a walkout Friday in protest of a staff member being fired for using a racial slur earlier this week.

The staffer, Marlon Anderson, says a student had called him the slur and he used it to educate the student on why he believed the word to be wrong. He was a security guard at the school.

“Because I didn’t accept it and tried to correct the behavior with hopes of a restorative conversation, I got fired,” he told 27 News.

Noah Anderson is Marlon’s son and also president of the black student union. He helped lead Friday’s walkout.

“We’re also going deeper,” Noah said. “We want our voices to be heard within all the decisions that affect us and the school district.”

The march started at the high school and ended at the administration building. Students say they marched both to support Marlon and to change the policy that led to his firing.

“The halls are kind of sadder without him,” said Grace Middleton, a member of the black student union. “This zero-tolerance policy is incorrect and needs to take into account context.”

Some teachers joined students as well, supporting their former colleague.

“He is the reason that most of our black student show up,” said Michelle Bayouth, a Latin teacher at the school. “He makes them feel wanted in this school.”

Once the students arrived at the administration building, they marched around it before a small group went inside, meeting with administrators for nearly two hours before re-emerging.

“There’s a process,” Noah said over a megaphone as he addressed the crowd. “And they said they’re willing to expedite the process.”

It wasn’t the rehiring that students were looking for, but it was a start in the appeals process and a promise to listen to students.

“Anything that has to do with us, our voices will be heard from now on,” Noah said to cheers. “We started with just being straight up with them, what we wanted as students, and that we want our voices to be heard any time you make any type of decision. And that they need to go into the communities any time they make a decision that affects a certain group of people.”

“I think what we are hearing is that there are many other lenses that we should be looking at this policy through,” said interim superintendent Jane Belmore. “And that’s what we want to try to make space for.”

Administrators admitted that the n-word is too complicated for a blanket policy.

“They are educating us,” said school board president Gloria Reyes. “They are our future, and we have to consider them in making decisions and policies that impact them directly.”

Reyes stopped short of saying the school district made a mistake in firing Marlon Anderson.

“I think that they did this based on what happened last year,” she said. “They understood the context surrounding this. And now looking at the context and the related incident, it’s an opportunity for the board at the board level to look at the policies that are being used.”

Student protesters walked away today satisfied, but not done.

“I’m satisfied with the fact that we were heard,” Noah Anderson said. “I’m not satisfied just yet until everything goes the way it should go... From what they told us, they said that they’re going to bat for us, and they’re going to try. And they’re going to work for it. And I trust them.”

The teacher’s union has filed a grievance on behalf of Anderson for him to be reinstated and receive back pay.

Reyes says Monday morning, she’ll meet with administrators about Marlon Anderson. She also says she wants to ensure the process moves quickly.

At the same time, the school board will begin reviewing school policies to determine how to change the discipline policy surrounding the n-word.

A school board member will also attend black student union meetings next week.

Friday afternoon, the Boys and Girls Clubs of Dane County announced they had temporarily hired Anderson while his appeal is finalized with the school district.

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